

Title: Modification of a Clinician's Guide to HIV Counseling and Testing

Organization: MA Department of Public Health, HIV/AIDS Bureau

Author: Abigail R. Averbach, MS

Additional Authors: Jorge Sanchez, MEd

Topical Issues of Focus: Social marketing, successful collaborations between programs to prevent perinatal HIV

Objective

To develop an easy-reference pocket guide for prenatal care clinicians to facilitate implementation of appropriate HIV counseling and testing sessions, including pretest counseling, informed consent, post-test counseling, and follow-up and referral.

Background

The MA Department of Public Health (DPH) HIV/AIDS Bureau had released a Clinician's Guide to HIV Counseling and Testing in May 2000. The Clinician's Guide, along with a Clinical Advisory regarding routine HIV Counseling and Testing of Pregnant Women, was disseminated to perinatal clinicians statewide in Spring 2000.

In November 2001, the CDC released the Revised Recommendations for HIV Screening of Pregnant Women, which replaced the 1995 Guidelines. The new recommendations differed from the earlier guidelines in that they (1) strengthened the recommendation that all pregnant women routinely be tested for HIV; (2) allowed for greater flexibility in terms of provider implementation, specifically with regard to simplification of pretest counseling and (3) allowed for more flexible informed consent processes.

In response to CDC's revised recommendations, the MA DPH HIV/AIDS Bureau initiated a process to update their Clinician's Guide in order to clarify the expectations for HIV Counseling and Testing of pregnant women in MA. The new guide would emphasize the following points: (1) MA DPH endorsement of ***routine provision of HIV counseling*** to all pregnant women; (2) MA DPH endorsement for prenatal care providers to recommend and offer ***voluntary HIV testing*** to all pregnant women; (3) the need for ongoing HIV risk assessment throughout the prenatal period; (4) the need for general risk assessment not only to lead to HIV testing, but also to provide behavioral and mental health counseling to reduce HIV risk during pregnancy and beyond; (5) the need for risk reduction counseling and support at any point during prenatal care (early or late), and the benefits of treatment and care at any point during the prenatal period; and (6) the importance of a collaborative approach with the pregnant woman, both in the decision to have an HIV test and, if HIV-infected, throughout her care with an HIV clinical specialist. It was also decided that specific information regarding treatment recommendations could be eliminated from the Clinician's Guide because they were evolving rapidly and had become much more specific to an individual's clinical indicators and circumstances.

Methods

In order to develop the updated Clinician's Guide, a cross-section of providers gave input about the current clinical environment, increasing demands of clinicians, practical, and attitudinal barriers to the provision of HIV counseling and testing options, and practical solutions for active and appropriate referrals to psychosocial specialists or other support services, as needed. The key partners included several prominent perinatal HIV specialists, the director of the Ryan White Title IV (MassCARE) program, as well as internal counseling and testing and health communications staff.

Results and Conclusions

Some of the major challenges of developing the new Clinician's Guide included developing a more prescriptive and explicit set of guidelines for risk assessment and risk reduction counseling; the decision to remove clinical specifications but include recommendations for clinicians to integrate more prevention-oriented activities in their prenatal care services; and the emphasis on direct provision or referrals to behavioral interventions and HIV risk-reduction activities, including sexual risk reduction and needle exchange programs. An unexpected challenge was converting the typical low-literacy language of most of MA DPH public information materials to a vernacular that would be more appropriate to a clinical audience.

The revised Clinician's Guide is in final draft form and will be distributed to providers during National HIV Counseling and Testing Week, 2004.